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SMARAGDA'S LOVER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Man Who Ate the Popomack

Smaragda's Lover

A Dramatic Phantasmagoria

By

W. J. Turner

London

Chatto & Windus

1924

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
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CHARACTERS

(In order of their appearance)

SIR LEO EDWARD MEYER ("Teddy")

DUMBELL (Butler)

ARTHUR MEDULLA (Liberal M.P.)

PERCY PARSONS (Prime Minister's Private Secretary)

MR. & MRS. FORTNIGHT-TAYLOR

MR. PILBERRY FLOWER (Editor of "The Situation")

LADY TORRENT

MISS MAUD TORRENT

SYLVESTER SNODGRASS

MISS SMARAGDA SNODGRASS

MR. A. DE BOMPH

LORD SIMON SNODGRASS

SEBASTIAN SNODGRASS

THE PRIME MINISTER

An integral part of this play is the music to Sylvester Snodgrass's "The Grand Parade," composed by Achilles de Bomph. At any stage performance this music must be played, and it will be found among the compositions of Lord Berners. Performing rights in the play are reserved by the Author, to whom application should be made through the Publishers.

ACT I



ACT I

Teddy Meyer's drawing room. Walls of jade green, two old gold brocaded settees, green carpet on polished floors, double folding doors jade green with old gold moulding, peacock blue lamp with shade behind left settee. Folding doors are opened to extent of showing one panel each showing the end of a grand piano (black) on low platform against row of windows. The peacock-blue curtains are not drawn. White marble fireplace on left and on the mantelpiece a fine reproduction reduced in size, of the Hermaphrodite in the Munich Glyptothek. This is reflected in a beautiful old mirror. There is nothing else on the mantelpiece. It is evening, through the windows the evening star is seen shining above the top branches of a tree at the end of the garden below.

The room is empty, a few moments after the Curtain has risen. The back part of the room behind the folding doors darkens. The light from the windows is blotted out but the Evening Star seems to move slowly down stage until it reaches the gap between the folding doors. A voice speaks :

I am no guest within this house to-night,
But like the Evening star I am shut out
With the trees sighing and the cries of birds,
Bright paths of comets and the noiseless humming
Earth moves upon its axis.

Soundless, drifting,
The clouds pass by, the armies of the stars

Thicken and lie encamped all round about us.
Let every man look up! Beyond that roof
They lie in myriads. (*Long pause.*)

Through this still air passing
What trembles in your hearts? 'Tis I your lover.
Smaragda's lover, who with her walks buried,
Invisible to sight. I lie within you deeper
Than lies the Spring within the earth all Winter.
I am the resurrection and the life
Within you all. Not yet have I ascended.

(*Silence.*)

Enter Meyer, a white-haired and oldish man of about seventy, faultlessly dressed in evening clothes with a small wax flower buttonhole, and white waistcoat with diamond buttons. He has a well-shaped head and nose but a loose protruding underlip. He shuffles across the room and looks at the hermaprodite on the mantelpiece which he moves the fraction of an inch. He then turns and for a moment stares at the Evening Star through the window, his carefully toiletteed expression falls away and his face relapses into a pitiful empty dejection. His whole body loses its rigidity and hangs loosely over the floor. He stays like this for a few moments until he hears the door open and the Butler enter. Instantaneously he recovers himself.

MEYER (*savagely*). Why haven't you drawn those curtains? Damn it, you've been long enough with me now to know that all curtains must be drawn at sunset. Why should my dinner be spoilt by that melancholy sight you blundering fool! (*Butler stands still.*) (*Screaming.*) Shut it out

will you? (Butler *walks towards the window, Meyer watching shivers.*) Run, damn you! (Butler *walks faster but does not run, draws curtains.*) Ugh! that's better! Switch on that other light . . . Ask Mr. Medulla and Mr. Parsons to come up here. They've had quite enough of my old brandy and try to-night to announce the names clearly for once. And precious names they'll be too—Tailors, Turners and Thompsons, in hideous clothes, and without sock-suspenders. (*Sneering.*) Why you'll look like a gentleman beside them, Dumbell!

DUMBELL. I hope not, sir.

MEYER. And why?

DUMBELL. One gentleman in the house is enough, sir.

(*Exit Butler.*)

MEYER. I give that fellow too much license, but I suppose sometimes he forgets that I am his employer and not a guest.

(*Enter Parsons followed by Medulla. Both slightly flushed with Meyer's excessively good food and drink.*)

PARSONS. Really, Teddy, you are the most wonderful of hosts! What a dinner, too exquisite! And this room, enchanting! How is it I don't come oftener?

MEDULLA. How is it you are here now? I never knew he cared for music?

MEYER. My dear Arthur, if I only invited people here who cared for music my house would be empty.

PARSONS. Now Teddy darling, you know I love your music. Isn't it the best in London and has anyone ever been known to dare to whisper during a performance in your house?

MEYER. Well, you can shout or whisper as you please to-night. I don't suppose you could make any noise that the composer hasn't already thought of.

PARSONS. Really? Why, what is happening?

MEYER. The greatest living musical genius is going to perform.

PARSONS. Oh really!

MEDULLA. What, Stravinsky!

MEYER. My dear Arthur you can't possibly think that I should have any name so "used," so tongue-worn, so stale to offer to my guests. This man is "new." He was only discovered yesterday.

PARSONS. Who discovered him?

MEYER. Who discovers anything in London to-day? Why, the Snodgrasses!

MEDULLA. Are they coming?

MEYER. They are bringing him.

PARSONS. What's his name?

MEYER. I don't know—I'm relying on Dumbell. I've warned him to pronounce every name distinctly.

MEDULLA. It's probably unpronounceable.

PARSONS. Who else is coming ?

MEYER. Lady Torrent.

PARSONS. Dear old "Cascade," is she still falling ?

MEYER. She's past the age, but she's not yet frost-bound.

PARSONS (*to Medulla*). Do you know she's making up to poor old "Tosh."

MEDULLA. "Tosh" !

PARSONS. Yes. "My dear Prime Minister" she writes to him. You'd think she was in the Cabinet.

MEDULLA. But she always declared she'd never have him in her house and she's always refused to meet him.

PARSONS. Ah, she's deserting you, he's terribly, indescribably flattered.

MEYER. Don't be alarmed, Arthur, her intentions are neither amorous nor political, as Percy knows.

PARSONS. No, she's got a man who will give a quarter of a million to be made a Lord and she

wants "Tosh" to promise to put him in the next honours list if he gives the money towards a National Theatre.

MEDULLA. National Theatre! What an extraordinary idea! Why on earth should she want that?

PARSONS. Perhaps she wants to act Juliet. But she'll not find another Romeo except on the stage.

MEYER. Why not? She's reached the age of eternal youth.

MEDULLA. But Tosh won't give a Barony for that.

PARSONS. Tosh naturally wants the money to go to his political fund, but she won't agree, so he's trying to find out who the man is and go behind her.

MEDULLA. The usual "Tosh" tactics. What a dishonest scoundrel the fellow is!

MEYER. My dear Arthur, there are no newspaper men present. Don't waste your moral sentiments on us.

MEDULLA (*earnestly*). You can't possibly deny that "Tosh" is an unscrupulous blackguard, that he is completely unreliable, that he keeps in office only by the most shameless trickery, that he has forfeited the respect of every political party in the country, that he has dragged England's name into the mud, that name which by association with the moral uprightness and integrity of character of generations of our great statesmen had acquired a prestige before which the negro in the

darkest forests of Africa and the Chinaman on the farthest plains of central Asia trembled and—

PARSONS. My dear Arthur, is your brain going? You're not practising a speech on us are you?

MEDULLA. Well, of course, you're not a Liberal, and I can't expect you to sympathise—

MEYER. My boy, I assure you we are quite alone. You must give yourself a rest. You're not in the Camberwell Town Hall.

PARSONS. You're making too many speeches. You'll have a nervous breakdown.

MEDULLA (*clasping his forehead*). I'm so sorry! I apologise. I get automatically worked up at the bare name of "Tosh."

PARSONS (*sympathetically*). I know; he affects a lot of people like that. I don't see why. I never take the slightest notice of him myself.

MEDULLA (*beginning conventionally but getting louder and louder and ending as an orator addressing an open-air meeting*). You're his Secretary and you don't care how long he stays in office. It would suit you admirably if he remained Prime Minister for the next ten years. (*Warming up again.*) For all you care the country might go to the dogs in the meantime, and not England only, but Germany, Italy, France, Europe also. Factories may everywhere shut down, railways become disorganised, trade come to a standstill, unemployment in every country reach incredible figures, strikes spread in

every industry until millions of starving workers are thrown upon the streets to feed the ranks of the Communists and Bolsheviks. . . . Unless you want to see Red Revolution spread like a devastating fire annihilating in its irresistible course every vestige of this great civilization which has been so laboriously built up throughout the centuries you will vote—

MEYER (*spluttering with rage*). Vote !! Jesus Christ ! Medulla ! If you go on like this I'll have you thrown out !

PARSONS (*taking out a phial from his waistcoat pocket*). My dear Arthur, take one of these.

MEDULLA (*groaning*). My head ! Please *do* forgive me Teddy. I am so sorry.

(*Enter Butler announcing clearly and in a tone of undisguised contempt.*)

DUMBELL. Mr. and Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor.

MR. F.-TAYLOR (*going up effusively*). Dear Sir Leo, I knew you were a Liberal, but I never knew you were such an idealist and such a magnificent speaker.

MEYER (*politely shaking hands with Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor*). How do you do ?

MR. F.-TAYLOR. I congratulate you. I hope you didn't mind our listening. I couldn't bear to interrupt you. It did my heart good to hear such sentiments.

MEYER (*coldly*). My dear Sir, what you heard was one of the servants amusing us with popular oratory. Allow me to introduce you this gentleman—Mr. Thompson.

MR. F.-TAYLOR. No, Taylor, Sir Leo.

MEYER. Of course, I beg your pardon, Mr. Tanner—Mr. Arthur Medulla.

MR. F.-TAYLOR. *The* Arthur Medulla! Delighted to meet you, sir, you are indeed the hope of our poor misgoverned country at this crisis. (*Taking him aside.*)

MEYER. Percy, this is Mrs. Tomkins, wife of the famous dramatic critic Mr. Firstnight-Thompson, of whom you have probably not heard—

PARSONS. Delighted to meet you, I always read your husband's articles with great interest.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*rather severely*). My husband's name is Fortnight-Taylor. All the best people read him I believe, Mr. Percy. Lady Torrent says he is the only dramatic critic in London.

PARSONS. Dear Lady Torrent, she is *so* enthusiastic. At Epsom they call her "the bookies' hope."

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*coldly, as if she has only half understood*). Do you race, Mr. Percy?

PARSONS. No, I only chase. (*Smiling at her half mockingly.*) I pursue the fair.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*withdrawing a little doubtfully*). Indeed !

PARSONS. But not for myself—for others. I am what is called a tout.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*distantly*). A tout !

PARSONS. Yes, I am a tout. In other words, I pry and peep about.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*making an effort to understand him*). Are you a poet, Mr. Percy ?

PARSONS. Not in the sense you mean.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR. Tell me who is the distinguished looking gentleman talking to my husband and Sir Leo ?

PARSONS. Oh, he is the famous Arthur Medulla, leader of one of the opposition parties—the Lopokova Liberals. Poor fellow, he was quite brilliant before he went off his head.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*trying to snub him*). “Off his head.” Why, what do you mean, Mr. Percy ? He is our greatest living politician, the only hope of our poor country.

PARSONS. Poor country !

(*The door opens and Butler announces the new-comer in his usual tone of contempt. Mr. Fortnight-Taylor and Mr. Medulla move off stage behind folding doors.*)

DUMBELL. Mr. Pilbery Flower.

(Mr. Pilbery Flower is a tall thin, melancholy man with dark hair, drooping moustache and an air of dejection.)

MEYER (*advancing to meet him*). How d'y'e do, Flower ?

FLOWER (*shaking hands listlessly*). We're still alive—just think of it, and all this gaiety, this levity can go on while the fate of Europe is trembling on the balance.

MEYER. *In the balance, Flower. I wish you journalists would not misuse the English language.*

FLOWER. What is the English language compared to the disaster that confronts us ! In a night mankind may perish !

MEYER. Well, while there's time let me introduce you to this lady. (*He turns to Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor.*)

FLOWER (*with melancholy*). I know her. She is no good. Nothing is any good. Fleets of aeroplanes travelling at an incredible height, invisible and noiseless, will fill the sky . . . without warning, without a hint or a sign from anybody, in less than an hour they will be here.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*alarmed*). To-night !

MEYER. No, not to-night, madam, to-night we are going to hear the greatest musical genius of the century.

PARSONS. Also, we are not at war with anybody and we are not going to be—although, as everybody knows, Mr. Flower is always thinking we are.

FLOWER. There will be no more ultimatums no more declarations of war. A situation will arise, there will be negotiations, the position will become more and more obscure. In that darkness the politicians like blind moles will be burrowing. Suddenly they will all stop, conscious that they are not getting anywhere. Then through some mind like a flash in the silence before a storm the lightning will discharge. The situation is clear. Everything depends on the first blow . . . there is not an instant to lose, the rats will have no time to scurry to their holes. Slowly from the clouds will fall upon London, as softly as the evening dew, the unknown. . . . In an hour, this night or any night, men and women will be conscious of an insidious something in the air. They may be playing cards, they may be dancing, eating, or talking. Let them not stir to open a door or a window, there is nothing to be done. Creeping through the cracks and crevices, floating down the chimneys comes the inexorable, blinding, choking vapour. In their terror they will fling open the doors, rush into the streets to fall screaming into the gutters. Helpless masses crawling like worms blindly in the darkness shrieking and moaning in pain and terror. . . . So it will go on all through the night. When the sun rises London and its millions will be no more. There will be a hush over all the city and the daylight will fall on streets choked with heaps of dead from under which here and there a blind piteous creature crawls.

PARSONS. Good God, Flower, you make one's flesh creep with your idiotic nonsense.

MEYER. This is going to be a pleasant evening!

(Enter Medulla and Mr. Fortnight-Taylor into the gap between the folding doors, one of which Medulla grasps as he speaks.)

MEDULLA *(earnestly to Fortnight-Taylor)*. We are on the brink of ruin. The country needs leadership and what does it get! Nothing, but trickery and manœuvring. It is in the hands of a traitor to the great Liberal principles of open diplomacy and honest dealing. Gentlemen, I implore you to consider the gravity of your position, Gladstone—?

MEYER *(in a tone of exasperation)*. Gladstone!

PARSONS. Surely you can't be meaning to trot that old dead head round your constituency—they'll never stand it.

MEDULLA *(drawing himself up and making a passionate gesture)*. I say Gladstone!

MEYER *(furious shrieking)*. Gladstone!! I will not hear these *clichés* in my house. What devil possesses you, Arthur, to treat my guests as if they were a public meeting. This is not Manchester!

(Enter Butler who announces the newcomers in a tone suggesting that he is not responsible for their virtue. Arthur Medulla and Mr. Fortnight-Taylor exeunt behind folding doors.)

DUMBELL. Lady Torrent and Miss Maud Torrent.

LADY TORRENT. Oh my dear Sir Leo, and how are you? Did I hear you mention Manchester? You are not going there I hope?

MEYER. My dear Emily, for me civilization ends at Regent's Park. I've never been north of it since I was at Eton.

PARSONS. And that is South!

(Maud Torrent *nods curily to Parsons and goes and sits on divan.*)

LADY TORRENT (*sighing*). Regent's Park! Ah! how I remember the turnstiles and the parrots sitting on their perches as you go in, and all the poor caged animals! I always felt so free and happy there. It is a place to which one never goes alone. I have not been there for years. (*She pauses and in changed tone continues.*) Dear Mr. Mappin, didn't he bring the polar ice there and arrange it in terraces for the white bears? I suppose he was knighted. Sir Webbe Mappin or something—

FLOWER. All the animals at the Zoo will be wiped out in a single night—all! all!

MEYER. Emily, let me introduce Mr. Pilbery Flower, the famous editor of "The Situation."

LADY TORRENT. Ah! Mr. Flower, I have heard so much about you and have so wanted to meet you. Tell me now, do you think this wretched Government will last much longer? Of course I read you every week in "The Situation," I *love* your pessimism—it's so stimulating, but what do you really think?

MR. P. FLOWER. I do not know if civilization will last much longer.

MAUD TORRENT. What is civilization anyhow? Why should it last?

FLOWER. Who is that young lady?

LADY TORRENT. My daughter, Mr. Flower—a great admirer of yours.

FLOWER (*in his usual tone of melancholy abstraction*). She has been badly brought up. Most of the young women one meets nowadays are like that, they have no faith in anything.

PARSONS. Not *all*, Flower, this lady has the most touching faith in you and Medulla and your fellow Liberals.

FLOWER (*looking at Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor sadly*). She is no longer young.

MEYER (*politely to Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor*). Surely your eyes deceive you. Or are you looking at Percy. Mr. Flower is a notorious pessimist, madam.

FLOWER. Her heart is not young, the young are never Liberals. The young care nothing for civilization.

(*Enter Butler.*)

DUMBELL (*in a tone of respect*). Mr. Sylvester Snodgras and Miss Smaragda Snodgrass.

SYLVESTER (*entering, dressed carefully, but with individuality*). Civilization depends entirely on

the raping of unwilling virgins. Isn't that true, Teddy? (*Shaking hands.*)

(Smaragda crosses and sits down beside Maud.)

MEYER (*a touch of irony always creeps into his voice*). I never knew it. My dear boy, this is a mixed party, there is at least one lady present.

LADY TORRENT. Not me Sylvester dear, and hardly Maud. You know how we both love you.

SYLVESTER (*turning to Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor*). Then it is to you, Madam, that I must explain that my statement is a strictly scientific one. See, Towner! I am never facetious!

FLOWER. Towner! Who is he, sir?

SYLVESTER. Towner, I regret to say is an American. It is the one blot on what otherwise appears to be a portentous intellect.

PARSONS. Given that, others will no doubt appear.

SYLVESTER. Percy, you need not listen. It will be wasted on you.

LADY TORRENT. But what does this blemished American say?

SYLVESTER. He says, "ardent and willing mothers bear children with small heads, of inferior nervous organization, small spiritual stature, little intellect and no genius."

MEYER. I have always thought ardent women horrible.

PARSONS. But if there are to be no ardent mothers, how are we to get offspring at all?

MAUD. It would be difficult for you, Percy.

SYLVESTER. Genius and mental and moral superiority have always resulted when compulsory maternity was forced upon cold women.

FLOWER. But what proof does he offer for such an extraordinary statement?

SYLVESTER. Two thick documented volumes of proof. (*Airily.*) But I will give a few instances. For example, the superiority of the Romans to the races around them dated from the raping of the unwilling Sabine women. The rise of the Tartars in Central Asia was due to the enforcing of compulsory motherhood upon the tribute of Chinese maidens paid to the Tartar chiefs. The mothers or grandmothers of Ghenghis Khan and Tamerlane the Great had nothing to distinguish them from other women except their repugnance for their husbands. My own intellectual superiority over Percy is undoubtedly due to my mother's notorious dislike of my father—(*pause*) Percy is a love child.

FLOWER. Sir, and let me tell you my dear departed mother adored my father.

SYLVESTER. I can quite believe it.

LADY TORRENT. But what happens when the men are cold.

MAUD. Nothing, of course.

SYLVESTER. Coldness in men means sterility. It is only a virtue in women.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*blushing*). Only women have virtue.

SYLVESTER. Thank you, madam. It is a sublime thought but inaccurate. The truth is that coldness is woman's only virtue. (*Turning to Pilbery Flower and the others.*) In harems and in convents cold women can escape maternity. So the strain of sexual coldness dies out and the race, as you see in Moslem and Catholic countries, gradually deteriorates through breeding solely from ardent women. What have Spain and Turkey produced during the last few hundred years?

FLOWER. What about Granada, the Alhambra, Arabic mathematics and philosophy? To the Moors, Europe owes the introduction of rice, sugar, cotton, nearly all the fine garden and orchard fruits together with many less important plants such as spinach and saffron.

MEYER. We could have done without spinach.

FLOWER. They introduced the system of irrigation by flood gates, wheels and pumps. They also promoted many important branches of industry, improved the manufacture of textile fabrics, earthenware, iron and steel; they introduced the manufacture of a special kind of leather to Morocco, from which country it now takes its name. They also introduced inventions of a more ominous kind—gunpowder and artillery. The cannon they used appear to have been made of

wrought iron. But perhaps they more than compensated for these evil contrivances, by the introduction of the mariner's compass. Yet throughout this time, sir, they maintained the harem system.

SYLVESTER. My dear Sir, all the enterprise you speak of was the fruit of that buccaneering period—when they seized Christian virgins and made them unwilling mothers. As Towney says “their enforced fruitfulness quickly changed the region of Moslem rule from a spiritual desert to a garden.” In the same way the rise of the British Empire dates from the advent of the Puritans.

LADY TORRENT. Sylvester dear, you shock me ! How unlike you to say such a thing.

MAUD. He is only saying they were the Turks of England.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*warmly*). I am sure he is right, Lady Torrent. We owe the Liberal Party to the Puritans.

PARSONS (*blandly*). To the Nonconformists ! It is the name given to the Puritans when they ceased to be pure.

SYLVESTER. The Puritans did not allow cold women to escape marriage. The Puritan wife loved God, not her husband. In every Puritan bedroom her husband put up the text “be fruitful and multiply,” and however much she loathed him she obeyed—the percentage of genius rose immediately !

FLOWER. Ridiculous nonsense !

(*Enter at folding doors Medulla and
Mr. Fortnight-Taylor.*)

SYLVESTER. Now owing to the spread of sentimental literature everybody marries for love and instead of Shelley we get Mr. H. G. Wells. Mothers bear Northcliffes, Bottomleys, Beaverbrooks, Rothermeres and Riddells instead of Pitts, Washingtons, Gladstones and Disraelis. If this love-mania goes on in another generation Sir James Barrie and Mr. A. S. M. Hutchinson will be our greatest English classics. England is doomed unless something can be done to stop women marrying for love.

MEDULLA (*advancing*). No, sir, England is not doomed because in some poor humble hearts burns the glorious flame of pure unreflecting love—Remember those sacred and inspired words : “What are all these wigwams if ye have not love ? ”

MR. F.-TAYLOR (*stupified*). Wigwams !!

MAUD. Yes, of course, the domestic homes of the Red Indians. (*Sweetly.*) You mean by wigwams to typify home-life generally, and especially English and American homes don't you, Mr. Medulla ?

MEDULLA (*clasping his head*). Did I say wigwams ?

PARSONS. My dear fellow, you'd better go home and go to bed and stop reading the Bible, it's not improving your style—

SYLVESTER. A little love wouldn't do you any harm.

MEYER. Will you have a drink, Arthur?

MEDULLA. No, I want music, music will soothe me. I came here to hear music and forget all about England and you will not let me forget. Where is this music that will wash away my tears?

(Enter Butler. Medulla and Mr. Fortnight-Taylor disappear again behind the folding doors.)

DUMBELL (in a tone of disgust). Mr. de Bomph.

SYLVESTER. Ah, there you are, Achilles.

(De Bomph is a foreign looking, burly young man of about thirty with spectacles and a thick mop of hair standing up on end. He has a strained, anxious expression on his face as he faces his host who advances holding out his hand.)

MEYER. Ah my dear de Bomph, the whole company is awaiting your arrival.

DE BOMPH (in an anxious voice that he strives to moderate, but which is quite a loud whisper. He speaks perfect English). Can I go to the lavatory?

MEYER (agitated in a whisper). Certainly, certainly my dear fellow, come along.

(He leads him to the door and they go out.)

LADY TORRENT. Is he a great genius?

SYLVESTER. Sebastian says so.

LADY TORRENT. Where is Sebastian? Isn't he coming?

MAUD. If he isn't I'm off.

PARSONS. Doesn't de Bomph appeal to you, Maud? I should have thought—

MAUD. I hate music.

SYLVESTER (*mysteriously*). Sebastian is coming, but he may be late in getting here. (*Pause.*) Ssh! (*He holds up his hand.*) Isn't it curious that though we all know Sebastian so well we haven't the least idea of what he is doing at this moment?

(*They are all still as if listening.*)

SMARAGDA (*shading her eyes and speaking slowly in a clear, hard voice*). Sebastian is walking along a street not far from here. He is walking down the side of a square. He has passed the first lamp-post—(*pause*) the second—(*pause*) the third. If it is the same square as this he will be here in five minutes. (*Rising.*) But if it is not! If it isn't a London square at all? And where is London?

CURTAIN

ACT II

ACT II

Same Scene as Act I, a little later in the evening.

De Bomphe is playing a Prelude and Fugue of his own composition. He is finishing the Prelude and begins the Fugue, which is a short one of an extraordinary abrupt, elliptical character. The music can only be heard in the distance as a confusion of sounds but its character can be felt. The stage is empty until the last note dies away.

Enter Smaragda. She stands in the gap between the folding doors.

SMARAGDA. It is thrilling to feel such power. These artists are like immense engines that could scale Everest and not know they had left the plain. Their small bodies burn in the air with an intensity like the brightest stars. Yet just as the star whose flaming sphere exceeding the sun's a hundred times shows us but a small sparkle in the sky, all we see of their bodily combustion is a tiny system of sounds, a Sonata, a Fugue, or a cluster of letters or signs—a poem or an equation. These are the milky ways of the spirit and our bodies upon this earth are the constellation of some other God! What an enchantment to be born! (*She goes to the settee and sits down.*)

(*Enter Maud.*)

MAUD (*walking restless to and from and leaning against the mantelpiece*). How I envy your composure. Where did you get it? How did you get it? Your mother was a ballet dancer who never opened a book in her life. Your father collects pictures, but has some nervous disease which prevents him from looking at anything. He cannot even sit or stand still for two seconds. He is what the "Daily Herald" would call an effete aristocrat. He does not talk, he rumbles like a half-extinct volcano; and he is so mean; he treats you all so shabbily though he has fifteen thousand a year and no wife. If only he would go up Sebastian would have to settle down—and get married. (*Pause.*) Why don't you ask me if I am in love with Sebastian?

SMARAGDA. Because you're not.

MAUD. How do you know, I may be. He is the only man who really interests me.

SMARAGDA. He would soon cease to interest you if you married him.

MAUD. I should like one or two children, that would pass a couple of years.

SMARAGDA. What would you do after that?

MAUD. Amuse myself by making men fall in love with me. Provoke them and torture them until they ached to kiss the floor I walked on and never even let them touch the tips of my fingers—

SMARAGDA. Well, you do that already.

MAUD. I haven't a husband to make jealous. Besides you can torture men much more thoroughly when you are married.

SMARAGDA. Won't you ever get tired of that ?

MAUD (*viciously*). Do men ever get tired of drink or food ? Well, provoking men is food and drink to me. I get no pleasure from sleeping with a man, but I get intense pleasure from possessing a man's senses until he can't eat or drink or sleep, from treading down his will, wasting his time, ruining him physically and mentally until he is a mere slave crawling at my feet.

SMARAGDA. Is that what you want to do to Sebastian ?

MAUD. Yes, but I can't ; that is why I respect Sebastian, why I should like to marry him.

SMARAGDA. It is no virtue in Sebastian that he can resist you. He is simply not attracted.

MAUD (*bitterly*). Why should one be attracted where one is powerless. Sometimes when Sebastian smiles coolly and with that distant expression which shows that he has not been taking the slightest notice of what I have been saying, I long to throw myself at his feet and ask him to trample on me. But I have always resisted. Why should I resist ?

SMARAGDA (*intensely*). Because there is a lover waiting for you.

MAUD (*astonished*). A lover for me !

SMARAGDA. Smash every man you can ! O how I joy to see you crumple them up before you—wretched, pitiful creatures ! Throw them on the scrap-heap. It would be vile to yield one's body to them. But Sebastian is no better (*pause as Maud stops to look at her*) Sebastian is cold. He has no sexual imagination. He also is defective. But if you can allure him to desire you, do so.

MAUD. I have done so at times. Sebastian is not entirely cold. There have been moments when he has looked and desired me, but they were very rare, and nearly always in public.

SMARAGDA. Well if you could have a child it might be an advance on you both.

MAUD. Yes, but how ? These moments are very fleeting. Sebastian cannot have me in a drawing room and I am not always willing either.

SMARAGDA. Ask him down alone to a country cottage with you ?

MAUD. I'm not going to compromise myself like that.

SMARAGDA. Ask me too.

MAUD. Dear Smaragda you are an extraordinary person. Nothing seems to offend you.

SMARAGDA (*simply*). Why should it ? I believe in life. We must all struggle with the utmost intensity of which we are capable. I am not on Sebastian's side or on yours.

MAUD. Sebastian must marry me.

SMARAGDA. Why ?

MAUD. Because if he doesn't want me enough to marry me he shan't have me.

SMARAGDA. And if he did want you enough to marry you, you wouldn't want him.

MAUD. What a life ! What is the good of it all ! I am being eaten up with pride, discontent and boredom.

SMARAGDA. You are an engine of destruction, weeding out the unfit. You are a lovely and wonderful instrument. Civilization has produced you to lop off its rotten boughs. You spread death and corruption everywhere. Oh how beautiful and perfect you are !

MAUD (*drawing herself up*). Yes, I am at least lovely. My happiest moments are in my bath and when I undress at night. In the moonlight I look wonderful. I *feel* wonderful, and let the smooth soft light flow all over me. When I look out from my bedroom window in the country and see the moon shining over all the pure colours of the hills I touch them with my hands in a calm intense delight and it is my own body I am touching, my knees, my thighs and my breasts. I am filled with a sweet intense power, and I have completely forgotten my daily wretched self. But these moments do not last. They leave me with nothing. I cannot live on pride in my own beauty.

SMARAGDA. Pride is all we can live by.

MAUD. But I want to feel that intense admiration and delight in something outside myself. I want other feelings beside joy in my own beauty. Art bores me, I can't even read Sylvester's poems. Why is it I care nothing for music, nothing for pictures, nothing for literature only for my own body. While you who are as beautiful as I am have all sorts of pleasures. I often watch you listening to music and you have a look like some of those carved angels one sees in museums.

SMARAGDA. Men do not fall in love with me.

MAUD. The fools !

SMARAGDA. But I do not mind. Life is so exciting. I shall have no time for a lover. Do you think de Bomph as a lover could be as wonderful as that Prelude and Fugue ? I wonder if any one of Bach's wives ever got from him the intense delight I have got from his music. Surely what they got any man could have given, but I have had something that even you with all your allurements could not get, and nobody can give it to you . . . nobody can give us anything.

MAUD. I might stop you getting it. I might stop your friend de Bomph composing. He is already conscious of my existence.

SMARAGDA (*calmly*). Do your best. It is your duty. But I hope you don't succeed.

MAUD (*smiling*). I shall not try. That is the secret of my power. (*Exit.*)

SMARAGDA (*rising*). And I shall ask him to play again. (*Exit.*)

(*Enter Sylvester and Meyer.*)

MEYER. What time do you expect Sebastian to arrive?

SYLVESTER. Any moment now.

MEYER. Your father ought to be here soon. I asked him not to be later than half past ten. What am I to do with him when he comes if they haven't arrived?

SYLVESTER. Oh, keep him downstairs and give him a drink. Have you got any barley water?

MEYER. Barley-water?

SYLVESTER. Old St. Vitus won't drink anything else after dinner—but give him a folio of prints and a cigar—that'll keep him quiet until we want him—and tell him the Prime Minister's not yet arrived. I should like a drink myself. Can we get down this way? (*Points to door R.*)

MEYER. Yes, come along.

(*Exeunt.*)

(*Enter Lady Torrent, Mr. Fortnight-Taylor and Mr. Pilbery Flower. She sits down on settee left, one sits and the other stands beside her.*)

LADY T. Now I've brought you here because I want you both to help me. It is the greatest good fortune that I should have met you here to-night. I was very nearly not coming. I have been in

despair over a scheme that is very dear to me. I don't know if Sir Leo has told you, but I hope you won't think it very odd and foolish of me if I tell you that the passion of my life is to have in London a National Theatre.

MR. F.-TAYLOR. A most noble passion, Lady Torrent ; would that more of our upper-class ladies had it ! The only theatre most of them care for is the Law Courts.

LADY T. Oh, I don't want to appear "superior." I care nothing for Shakespeare, if that is what you mean. I want a large magnificent building in the heart of London, in Piccadilly, or Whitehall, opposite the Ritz or the Carlton—something grand and imposing that you can walk round like the Opera in Paris. I should like the outside to be of pink granite and it ought to be whitewashed until the Smoke Abatement Society cleans London, or it might be built of black marble. A Theatre is such an opportunity for an architect, don't you think ? It is all that is left now we have given up building churches. It can be so imposing, and so decorative inside. The interiors of all our theatres are abominable. I should insist on having all the furnishings and the entire interior decoration left to me.

MR. P. FLOWER. More idle reckless extravagance ! (*Fiercely.*) There are thousands of children in Germany to-day without milk, Lady Torrent.

MR. F.-TAYLOR. Surely that is very irrelevant Flower, to this question of a National Theatre.

MR. P. FLOWER. Nothing is irrelevant. All things are connected. If you spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on building a theatre you can't spend it on milk.

LADY T. But the milk is there isn't it? You don't make milk by not building a theatre. You might as well ask me not to buy your paper every week but send the sixpences to Germany. But if I didn't buy your paper I wouldn't know the Germans wanted milk, the "Morning Post" never mentions it.

MR. P. FLOWER. Nobody wants a National Theatre in this Country, and why should they when any day may be their last. Man has overreached himself. His power exceeds his wisdom. Europe is doomed, and here we sit chatting about a National Theatre when at any moment we may turn into a National Cemetery.

MR. F.-TAYLOR (*somewhat pompously*). I cannot share your gloomy forebodings, Flower. I have faith in the future of our Country. The present Government will not last for ever, and I cannot believe that Poincaré or Mussolini wish to destroy Europe.

LADY T. If Europe is destroyed we might as well leave something in the ruins for the future to look at. Think of Athens without the Parthenon, or Venice without St. Marks. If London were wiped out to-night what would the excavators find in a million years?

MR. P. FLOWER. Probably the brass ball on the top of the Coliseum.

MR. F.-TAYLOR. But unfortunately there is no hope of getting the money for a National Theatre. The British public cares for nothing but flapper actresses and dancing.

LADY T. I've got the money or most of it.

MR. F.-TAYLOR. Really !

MR. P. FLOWER. What !

LADY T. Well, I've persuaded a war-millionaire to promise £250,000 towards it for a title.

MR. P. FLOWER. I am astonished he hasn't got one. Where's he been hiding ?

MR. F.-TAYLOR (*his face falling*). But that's quite impossible. We cannot support the buying and selling of honours—and just as we have been having such a campaign against it. Whatever would Medulla say ? Why it's one of our chief weapons against the present Government.

LADY T. (*impatiently*). My dear Mr. Fortnight-Taylor, nobody takes that seriously. The trouble is the Prime Minister won't do it.

MR. F.-TAYLOR (*surprised*). What ! He won't give a title for a quarter of a million. But it's incredible.

MR. P. FLOWER. My dear fellow, you forget *he* doesn't get the quarter of a million.

LADY T. Yes, that's just the point. He wants to get the money for his party funds. He'd give a barony for a quarter of the sum if he could have

the money, but he won't give it for a donation to a National Theatre.

MR. P. FLOWER. Have you been negotiating with him?

LADY T. Indirectly, yes. But I've managed to keep him from learning who the man is. Now will you help me to persuade Mr. Medulla and his colleagues that if they come into power they'll give my friend a peerage if he gives a quarter of a million for a National Theatre.

MR. P. FLOWER. Your friend must be very ignorant if he'll spend a quarter of a million when he could get what he wants for fifty thousand or less.

LADY T. The poor man's quite illiterate. He's jumped from nowhere.

MR. P. FLOWER. Which means I suppose Yorkshire or Lancashire.

LADY T. I don't think he'd like to feel he'd bought a title outright. He'd like to feel he had earned it by some good work.

MR. P. FLOWER. He sounds like a lunatic. How on earth did he get his money?

MR. F.-TAYLOR. I feel we Liberals must keep our hands clean of this sort of thing. Titles should be awards given for merit. How can we expect the working man to have any respect for authority if distinctions are bought and sold.

LADY T. How else are they to be got? You don't think they ought to be inherited do you?

MR. F.-TAYLOR. I am as ardent a social reformer as anybody and, of course, I don't believe in hereditary honours, but as a party we stand for purity in public life.

(*Enter Medulla and Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor from folding doors centre.*)

MEDULLA (*solemnly*). Ah, that is the faith which shall bring us to victory—we stand for Peace in Europe and Purity at Home.

MR. P. FLOWER. And down with birth-control !

MEDULLA (*pompously*). That is a question which must be left to every man's conscience. It is not our business as a Political Party to meddle with such matters.

MRS. F.-TAYLOR (*admiringly*). But you wouldn't have us approve of sin, Mr. Medulla. As Secretary of the Mother's Union, I assure you these moral questions cannot be ignored. Any condoning of immorality, any suspicion of moral lukewarmness will be fatal.

MEDULLA. Personally, Madam, I view with abhorrence any attempt to undermine the sacredness of modern life. The family is a pillar of the State. But we must be careful not to tyrannise over the weak. It is the duty of organisations like yours to guide them. You noble mothers can lead where we politicians could only threaten.

MR. P. FLOWER. Are you a mother, madam ?

MR. F.-TAYLOR. My wife has a Mother's heart.

MR. P. FLOWER. Yes, we've all got hearts ; the point is, has she any children ?

LADY T. Please, you're all forgetting about my affair and it's really important.

MR. P. FLOWER. Yes, we'll attend to you, Madam, you at least have one discreditable offspring.

LADY T. (*sweetly*). Mr. Medulla, I appeal to you. I am sure you will agree that we ought to have a National Theatre where Shakespeare and the noblest dramatic works of our literature can be played for the improvement of the masses. A temple consecrated to Art, where the people will be brought into contact with the true and the beautiful. A noble building in the purest taste where all may learn that there is something finer and more satisfying than cinema melodrama and jazz revue.

MEDULLA. Certainly, Lady Torrent. I am all in favour of such a scheme. I always feel ashamed when a foreigner asks me where he can hear the plays of our greatest, the World's greatest, dramatist.

LADY T. You will give such a scheme your support then ?

MEDULLA (*in the most serious pompous manner*). Most decidedly. We have a National Gallery—one of the finest in the World. We have the

British Museum, the South Kensington Museums, the Guildhall, the Albert Memorial—we most certainly ought to have a National Theatre. Unfortunately, however, the idea is quite impracticable. There is no public demand for it and there is no money.

LADY T. But there is. I've got the money—promised.

MEDULLA (*his expression changing*). But you would need an immense sum.

LADY T. I've got a quarter of a million, that would do to start with.

MEDULLA. A quarter of a million ! But who's going to waste a quarter of a million in these times when there is such distress and unemployment everywhere, when as you know our Liberal Party—on which the future of this Country and of Europe itself depends—is almost without funds ?

LADY T. I've got a war-millionaire who wants a title and I thought you would agree that for such a public service any Government might well reward him with a peerage.

MEDULLA. We cannot sell titles, Lady Torrent. We should be no better than those who have discredited our Country and made a mockery of all distinctions. If your friend has such means at his disposal and is a worthy and respectable man, let him be of service to his Country. Merit never yet went unrewarded. He should stand for Parliament. Let him get into touch with the party

organisation at Headquarters. You will be doing your Country a service Lady Torrent—and not the first you have done—if you dissuade your friend from any such wasteful eccentricity as a National Theatre (*with a gesture of his hand to his forehead*) but I had hoped to be free from such matters to-night. The soothing effect of that young man's music has worn off already. I thought we were going to hear Sylvester read his latest poem. (*To Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor.*) Shall we go and find him?

(*Exeunt middle door.*)

MR. F.-TAYLOR. What a leader! He can't fail to win the Country. His attacks on the P.M. in the House grow more and more damaging.

MR. P. FLOWER (*gloomily*). We're between the Devil and the Deep Sea. Let us turn our attention to Poetry. Is Sylvester going to perform?

LADY T. Yes, and I've some news that will surprise you, but it's strictly secret and you must promise to say nothing about it.

MR. F.-TAYLOR. Of course.

MR. P. FLOWER. Are you sure you ought to tell us?

LADY T. Oh, it's nothing serious. It's about the next Poet Laureate. You know the old one is dead. . . . What was his name?—it doesn't matter, it was a name one never heard of, he must have been a complete failure.

MR. P. FLOWER. It's a ridiculous office. It's time it was abolished.

LADY T. Oh, no, Mr. Flower. It mustn't be abolished now, just as it's going to be useful to dear Sylvester.

MR. P. FLOWER. Sylvester !

LADY T. Yes, it's going to be given to Sylvester.

MR. P. FLOWER. Sylvester Snodgrass the next Poet Laureate !

LADY T. Yes, why are you so surprised ?

MR. P. FLOWER. Well one knows the present P.M. cares nothing for literature, but Sylvester! Surely you're joking.

MR. F.-TAYLOR. One would have expected him to choose a more popular writer. After all, who reads Mr. Snodgrass except his own friends ?

LADY T. Who else would you expect to read him ? It's not absolutely settled yet, but it's going to be to-night. I've promised Sebastian to help. But it's all very secret. The Prime Minister's coming here—Sebastian's bringing him—and I've promised to assure him that all the right people read Sylvester, which is true. Now will you both promise me that when the appointment's announced you won't attack it ? Because if it isn't given to Sylvester you know who'll get it, don't you ?

MR. P. FLOWER. But the P.M. coming to this house. How on earth has Sebastian managed that ?

LADY T. I can't imagine. Sebastian's wonderful.

MR. F.-TAYLOR. But the public will never stand it. Why Snodgrass's poems are totally unintelligible.

LADY T. All the better—the papers will be afraid to say anything.

MR. P. FLOWER. But Sylvester and Sebastian have always despised official art. It's contrary to their whole spirit for Sylvester to accept such a position.

LADY T. The poor boys must do something. Sylvester needs the money—their father is disgustingly mean and is always quarrelling with them. He hates everything that they admire and hardly gives them a penny. He lives entirely in the past. Raphael and Milton are his idols, but if Sylvester is made Poet Laureate, he'll either die from rage or excitement . . . or at any rate, he'll have to give them some money.

MR. P. FLOWER. What a civilization! Sodom and Gommorrah never reached such heights as these. They were mere unrefined beasts.

LADY T. (*smiling*). Yes, we've improved amazingly. (*Rising*.) We can do the dirtiest things with indefinable distinction. You don't quite realise, Mr. Flower, what an advance that

is, but then you are such a pessimist. I mustn't stay any longer with you or I shall find myself pretending to be wicked, your virtue is so catching. I'll go and find Sylvester who is shamefully neglecting his duty to corrupt our tastes. I leave Mr. Flower safely with you, Mr. Thompson. I feel sure you can convince him we are not all bad and clever. *(Exit.)*

MR. F.-TAYLOR. What a charming woman ! A trifle frivolous I'm afraid ; but I cannot for one moment believe all the stories one hears of her.

MR. P. FLOWER. What stories !

MR. F.-TAYLOR *(hesitating)*. Well, you know . . . perhaps I oughtn't to say, but anyhow you've probably heard them too.

MR. P. FLOWER. Heard what ?

MR. F.-TAYLOR. Well, for example, it's said that she's Medulla's mistress ; but I never believed it of him, and now I don't believe it of her.

MR. P. FLOWER *(rising)*. Among other things you're a dramatic critic. Well, it's astounding how little sense of drama most dramatic critics have got. *(Exit.)*

MR. F.-TAYLOR *(sitting with a perplexed look and then his expression becoming savage)*. He's a damned highbrow ! *(He gets up.)* His paper's always had to be subsidized, and no wonder ; would anybody read such stuff for pleasure ! *(pause)* I wouldn't be surprised if she wasn't Medulla's mistress. He seemed to take to Mary quickly

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enough. I wonder where they've got to? All these rich people are rotten through and through—I'll go and get a drink. *(Exit.)*

(Enter Dumbell and Lord Simon Snodgrass.)

DUMBELL. I will tell Sir Leo your lordship is here. *(He turns to go out.)*

LORD SIMON. Stop! Come here! *(He walks all round Tompkins, surveying him critically from side to side.)* You've got a fine Rococo face!

DUMBELL. Have I, my lord?

LORD SIMON. Yes, a very rare specimen too, very finely curved and flourished, beautifully lacquered—not a blemish anywhere. What date are you?

DUMBELL *(astonished)*. Date, my lord?

LORD SIMON. Somewhere about 1755, I should hazard; and by Caffieri—Philippe, not Jacques. *(He walks round the perfectly still Dumbell again.)* Probably intended as a life-size figure for a clock. I wonder where Meyer got you. I must ask him. You're a beauty. You're really lovely. *(He rubs his hands with glee. He strokes Dumbell's nose and cheeks.)* How wonderfully modelled! What subtle exaggeration! 'Pon my soul, Sebastian is quite right. They were masters in protuberance in the eighteenth century. What's that new slang word Sylvester used? Oh yes, blotto! This knocks me blotto! I shouldn't wonder if it isn't a Caffieri—certainly

it's not Italian. (*He looks closely up and down Dumbell.*) Perhaps there's a date somewhere . . .
. . . it must be 1754 or '5 at latest.

DUMBELL. 1884.

LORD SIMON (*astonished.*) What !

DUMBELL. 1884.

LORD SIMON. Rubbish ! Nonsense !

DUMBELL. My date's 1884.

LORD SIMON. Don't be ridiculous ! You can't possibly be later than 1756—perhaps '7. Why, even an art critic wouldn't be more than a hundred years out ; he'd know you were eighteenth century !

DUMBELL. I'm nineteenth—late nineteenth.

LORD SIMON. You're a fool ! Don't argue with me sir. I know what I'm talking about. I'm not a journalist. Nineteenth ! Preposterous ! Why, you're dated all over 1756.

DUMBELL. 1884.

LORD SIMON (*furiously, shouting*). 1756.

DUMBELL (*calmly*). If your lordship wishes, I can produce my birth certificate.

LORD SIMON (*flushed with rage*). Certificate ! You dare to try and humbug me with a certificate—me ! What certificate ? Who could give you a certificate ?

DUMBELL. Any doctor would certify me to be under fifty, my lord.

LORD SIMON. Have you the impudence to suggest that I should take the word of a biologist? What does a biologist know of works of art?

DUMBELL. I am not a work of art, your lordship. I am— (*His training makes him hesitate to say anything so personal and unofficial as "I am a man."*)

LORD SIMON (*triumphantly*). There, you see! What are you?

DUMBELL (*nervous for the first time*). I hardly know what, my lord. I am Sir Leo's butler.

LORD SIMON. Exactly! Dated 1756 . . . and Philippe Caffieri certainly!

DUMBELL (*still nervous*). My name is Dumbell, my lord.

LORD SIMON (*with a grimace of intense disgust*). Don't utter such a word in my presence! Where is Sir Leo? I want him. I want to buy you for Castel Pontemillia—my Italian place. I have nothing but quattroceto servants there at present. I have restored the moat and the drawbridge. The place is thoroughly put in order and fortified. I could stand a siege of eight months. I have immense stores of stone cannon-balls and mortars, all inscribed with my family coat-of-arms and the Snodgrass motto: "*De minimis non curat lex*," which means "We are above the Law!" I have immense reservoirs of oil and lead always kept

boiling ready to pour down upon the attackers through the embrasures of the battlements. Everything is perfect of the quattrocento period, but the general effect is gloomy. I don't think so, but it seems to depress my friends when they stay there. I have therefore had several Baroque apartments added in a small wing for the delectation of my guests where I entertain, and you would suit them admirably—admirably! (*To himself.*) They are also outside the moat, and if there is a revolution will be the first to fall. They'll make a useful sop for the mob. I've stored all the liquor there and I've undermined it with dynamite. What! haven't you gone? Go and fetch Sir Leo. (*Exit Dumbell.*) I must remember that phrase—this knocks me blotto! Well, young men of fashion of every age have had their slang. In my youth one of the smart words was Gothic—all through that damn fool Ruskin, I suppose! "How Gothic!" all the women used to say if you refused sugar in your tea. It was applied to everything with complete indiscrimination. Ultimately even Queen Victoria was Gothic. Another detestable expression was "utter." (*Enter Dumbell.*) Utter! Yes, you'd have been "perfectly utter"! Now I suppose you're blotto.

DUMBELL. Sir Leo says will you come down stairs to the library, my lord.

LORD SIMON. Gothic! Utter! Blotto! The English language, like everything else, seems to get less and less intelligible. (*Exeunt.*)

(The stage is empty for a few seconds. Enter from door R. Meyer and Sylvester.)

MEYER. Well, my dear boy, I've made your father comfortable. How long do you think he'll stay there patiently ?

SYLVESTER. You haven't told him I'm here yet have you ?

MEYER. No, I've let him think you're coming with Sebastian and the Prime Minister. When I said I expected the P.M. any moment he very gracefully waved his glasses at me and said, "Yes, yes, with my sons !"

SYLVESTER. Dear old St. Vitus, he's really prodigious !

MEYER. My dear, but he is fascinating. One never meets such manners nowadays.

SYLVESTER. Yet he can be charming, but he's an incredible imbecile and as cunning as a rat.

MEYER (*nervously*). I hope Sebastian is successful. I shall feel extremely embarrassed if I've got to face your father with no Prime Minister. I had to explain to him why I didn't bring him upstairs . . . that I'd got a mixed rabble here . . . writers, etc., he mightn't care about.

(Lady Torrent appears at entrance between folding doors, but stops to listen on hearing her name.)

SYLVESTER. O there's no doubt about Sebastian, he's got a trump card with the P.M. He's

going to tell him Lady Torrent is here and is prepared to meet him and he'll hint at her political conversion.

MEYER. But will he believe it ?

SYLVESTER. Well you see it's a strong point old Cascade's having written to him about her ridiculous Theatre scheme. It'll be easy to persuade Tosh that's merely bluff. He'd find it difficult to believe anyone was serious about a theatre. Besides, Sebastian got the man's name out of her the other day and, if necessary, we'll bribe him with that ; then, if all else fails, once we've got him here we'll simply kidnap him, until we get the money out of St. Vitus.

MEYER (*nervously*). My dear boy, I hope you won't do that. You and Sebastian are far too reckless and really you ought not to call your father St. Vitus.

SYLVESTER. Nonsense. It's not my fault he's my father. I say, you'd better not let him see this you know. (*He covers the Hemaphrodite with a pocket handkerchief.*)

MEYER. Sometimes you make me feel quite uncomfortable. The P.M. may not be able to come. Percy told me at dinner there's a special Cabinet meeting suddenly summoned for 11 o'clock to-night. That's very unusual. It must mean something serious. (*Looks at his watch.*) It's a quarter past ten now ; you'll have to give your show at once, I've promised it you know.

SYLVESTER. Yes, there'll just be time.

(Lady Torrent *vanishes back*.)

Come along, we'll collect De Bomph and tell everybody.

(*Exeunt. The stage is empty a few moments. Enter Lady Torrent and Arthur Medulla.*)

LADY T. (*breathlessly*). How fortunate I found you. Quick, sit down there. (*Leads him to settee.*) They'll be back in a moment for Sylvester's show.

MEDULLA. My dear Emily, what's the matter now? Am I never to be allowed to rest.

LADY T. It's urgent and most important. I've just overheard that there's to be a special Cabinet meeting at 11 o'clock to-night—that means a European crisis.

MEDULLA. Well, isn't that what we've been expecting?

LADY T. Yes, but do you know the Prime Minister's coming here to-night?

MEDULLA. What!

LADY T. And if he fails to turn up at the Cabinet meeting, if he *disappears* for twenty-four hours, the Government's doomed. It would have to resign as there's no one else who could carry on for a day.

MEDULLA. Well!

LADY T. Well, Arthur, there's no reason to beat about the bush. We mean nothing to each other now. But I'm on your side politically, although God knows I haven't much more faith in you than in Tosh . . . but you've got better friends.

MEDULLA (*complainingly*). You've never appreciated me.

LADY T. I expected too much. But I'll be generous. I'll do you a service now. I'll kidnap the P.M. for forty-eight hours and you'll have your chance.

MEDULLA (*pompously*). But I couldn't consent to such a thing. If we come into power it must be by the wish of the Country, not by a trick.

LADY T. It will be by the wish of the Country. The Country wants you now. If there were an election you'd sweep the polls ; you've said so yourself and I believe it's true ; everybody is sick of "Tosh."

MEDULLA. Well, when they call for me I'll be ready.

LADY T. You must seize your opportunity as Cromwell or Napoleon would have done.

MEDULLA (*weakening fretfully*). But it's so hurried, so undignified . . . and then I'd feel I owed it to you and that's not—

LADY T. (*looking at him contemptuously*). Pleasing to your vanity. You're not big enough to owe

anything to a woman. You're so weak that you want a constant moral spongeing to give you confidence. I believe you're afraid of the responsibility of power—to think that I should ever have let myself be seduced by such a worm !

MEDULLA. I do not defend my past conduct, but I was very inexperienced when I met you . . . you dazzled me.

LADY T. Yes, but how the devil did you dazzle me.

MEDULLA (*sulkily*). I suppose you were accustomed to the process.

LADY T. You cad ! Now listen to me. You can't afford to have our relations exposed. What would your highly respectable Secretary of the Mother's Union think of it ? It's always been a weakness of your party that it was so dependent on humbug. Now if you don't accept my plan I'll expose you. I'll get my husband to divorce me. He'd be delighted and I can give him all the evidence he needs. On the other hand, if you agree you'll not be accepting anything from me, you'll be rendering me a very great service.

MEDULLA (*reviving*). I expected you wanted something.

LADY T. My God, you are incredible ! I want nothing but a peerage for my friend upon his giving me £250,000 towards a National Theatre.

MEDULLA. You can't expect me to believe you care about a National Theatre.

LADY T. No, but you'll have to believe it.

MEDULLA (*grumblingly*). Why can't the party have the money—why waste it like that. You know how low our funds are.

LADY T. All the more reason for accepting my plan. It will save you election expenses before you're in office. Now is it agreed?

MEDULLA. If it fails or if anything comes out, I shall repudiate all knowledge of it.

LADY T. (*ironically*). Of course, and in the future we need not even pretend to like each other. All I want is that peerage. I'll not trouble you again. Quickly, yes or no, there's someone coming.

MEDULLA (*peevishly*). Very well, but I wish I understood why you want a Theatre.

LADY T. I must do something in my old age.

(*Enter Sylvester, Meyer, Mr. Fortnight-Taylor, Parsons and (later) Mr. Pilbery Flower, Medulla and Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor.*)

PARSONS. Hullo Arthur, you look as if you had just lost a Constituency.

LADY T. Or been offered a monarchy.

SYLVESTER (*gesticulating to Dumbell in background through folding doors*). Now, oyster, push up the screen.

PARSONS. Yes, nowadays that would be even more disagreeable. . . . But one could always refuse it.

LADY T. Ah, but it's a glittering bauble.

MRS. F. TAYLOR. Glittering baubles would never appeal to Mr. Medulla, I am sure.

MEDULLA (*solemnly*). Thank you, madam, it is the belief that I represent the opinions of thousands of simple honest people whose only desire is to serve their country, that would sustain me if ever I were called upon to undertake the terrible responsibility of leading the nation—

PARSONS. Well—

Brrr Umph zzzzbrrrumph !!!

(It is a burst of noise from the band. They all jump.)

What the devil was that?

LADY T. (*ironically*). The plaudits of the multitude.

(Sylvester reappears from behind folding doors. A red screen is pushed up towards the opening between them. The screen is painted in the 1913-23 style of affected infantilism, with a restaurant table in left-hand corner at which is seated an immensely fat, splendidly dressed woman of fashion with a touch of Jewish blood, wearing pearls. With her is a very elegant young man. They are looking at the centre of the screen on which is painted a hideous negro mask through which protrudes a megaphone. A large sign in the right-hand corner reads "Thé dansant—The Blue Blow-Flies Band.")

SYLVESTER. Now then, oyster, bring some chairs! (*Dumbell opens folding door and brings in a few light gilt chairs in which they all sit.*) Are you ready, de Bomph?

DE BOMPH (*in the distance behind the screen and folding doors*). Yes.

SYLVESTER. Are you all comfortable. Don't get too near the trumpet. (*He disappears behind folding doors which are now drawn together so that the screen completely fills the gap.*)

MR. P. FLOWER (*standing at side*). To think that this is the last word in modern art!

ALL. Ssh!

(*The band of three saxophones, one trumpet, two guitars, a Moor-piano and percussion begins a slow rhythmic syncopated dance in strict time. Then the voice comes through the megaphone.*)

VOICE. "The Grand Parade," by Sylvester Snodgrass. Music by Achilles de Bomph.

THE GRAND PARADE.

Four Verses and Chorus.

All zebras, quaggas, lamas, mules,
Hyenas, jackals, horses, bulls,
Leopards, tigers, monkeys, asses,
Flowers, birds and insect-masses,
Portraits of life's supreme disaster—
God, the great high complex-master—
Ere self-consciousness first came
To blur your faces with its blame

Spoiling your pure symmetry
 For some higher geometry,
 Dimming all your lustre quite
 With the spectroscope of Right :
 Behold, superior to you all
 Man and Woman blushing fall.

CHORUS (*with saxophone embroidery*).

Then they had the jew-jerry-jew jams
 jew-jams !

Then they had the jew-jams, jew-jams,-jew !

Hills and mountains, valleys, lakes,
 Sun, moon, planets, star-dust snakes,
 Spiral-systems whirling mad,
 Faces neither good nor bad,
 Masks which motion-matter took
 When it formed itself to look—
 Gazing at yourself you see
 Man and Woman taking tea.
 She gigantic, smiling, fat ;
 He enigma's lean Tom-cat
 On her spreading bosom throws
 Himself, the Look which hourly grows
 Vivider and more intense
 Centre and circumference.

CHORUS :

Then they had the jew-jerry-jew-jams
 jew-jams !

Then they had the jew-jam-jew jam-jew !

*(During this Chorus Lord Simon Snodgrass opens
 the door R. and half enters. He stands shaking, but*

*unobserved, and looks at the scene through his glasses
astonished, then throws up his hands in horror and
vanishes.)*

Faces which we call the mob—
Gladys, Muriel, William, Bob,
Complexes, suppressions, dreams
Variants on sexual themes
Neuroses, manias, and desires,
Smoke-signs from bad-burning fires
On your hidden Ideal gaze
Mrs. Raphael-Smolzer-Glaze
And her partner, Raphael-Schuster-
Double-Love's great Filibuster !
Here in effigy you see
What your starved sex longs to be ;
Here once more perfection's had,
Nothing's either good or bad.

CHORUS.

Then they had the jew-jams, jew-jerry-
jew-jams !
Then they had the jew-jams, jew-jams-jew !

Now those pale reflecting mirrors
Of suppressed and deadly terrors,
Parsons, deacons, spinsters, priests,
Non-consumers of love's feasts,
Prurient mixed-bathing haters
Silk-drawer maddened, sour-grape *paters*
Gaze on perfect innocence
Consciousness at one with sense
Raphael-Schuster rounds his days
With Mrs. Raphael-Smolzer-Glaze,

Not a ten-to-one chance bar one
 Either's faithless to his far one—
 God is motion, but defeated
 In a dance he has been cheated.

* * * * *

Thus we keep the circle going
 Though there's nothing, nothing doing !

CHORUS.

Then they had the jew-jams-
 Jew-jerry-jew-jams. Then they had the—

(Enter Dumbell, he shouts above the noise.)

DUMBELL. Mr. Sebastian Snodgrass has
 arrived !

CURTAIN

ACT III

ACT III

Same Scene. The screen has been moved away and the folding doors are as before.

(Enter Smaragda. She closes the folding doors softly after her, raises her arms above her head and smiles happily.)

SMARAGDA. Alone ! Alone ! The most beautiful, the most magical of words ! How rich this room becomes the moment I close the door and am shut up within its four walls ! *(She drops her arms and looks about her and is very still for a moment or two.)* How everything grows in the silence ! These chairs how daintily their beautiful shapes come out of their hiding-places and show themselves to me. And that mirror, it is like a pool which has been put to sleep, and it puts to sleep all who gaze in it. Or not to sleep, but into another world. *There* am I, removed, unattainable, remote, not to be troubled even by a breath of wind. Yet I move *(she moves)*, turn, smile. O Smaragda, darling, beautiful Smaragda, will you not speak to me ? Where are you going, dear Smaragda ? In what secret world, so far, so close at hand do you live ? Am I never to meet you ? Are we never to speak to one another, to know one another ? Smaragda !

(Enter Maud.)

MAUD. Who was that ?

SMARAGDA (*recovering, calmly*). What do you mean ?

MAUD (*half-smiling*). Whoever was it ? Where's he vanished ?

SMARAGDA. You heard me whispering my own name. It's a trick I have.

MAUD. Oh, I'm so bored ! bored ! bored ! Whatever shall I do ?

SMARAGDA. The sooner someone sends you to bed with a child the better.

MAUD (*with a grimace of distaste*). Oh, that ! I might just as well get drunk, it's less painful.

SMARAGDA. But it doesn't last long enough ; besides I should have thought pain was one of the pleasures you would have appreciated most.

MAUD. It's so disfiguring, and from what man could I possibly suffer such a protracted indignity ? (*Smaragda laughs.*) Smaragda darling, be a dear, and go and send Sebastian here.

SMARAGDA (*moving towards door*). You can do nothing with Sebastian, why do you waste your powers on him ?

MAUD. My dear Smaragda, don't give me advice. It's not worthy of you. Don't you ever crave for the impossible ?

SMARAGDA (*disappearing*). Always ! (*Exit.*)

ACT THREE

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(Maud is alone for a few moments, then Sebastian enters. Sebastian is a quiet slender young man of about 30, with a mask of perfect dress, manners and outward calm.)

MAUD. Why do you never come to see me ?

SEBASTIAN (*quietly with the slightest hint of mockery in his gallantry*). I come as often as I dare.

MAUD. What rubbish. Why do you talk to me like that ?

SEBASTIAN (*smiling*). You terrify me to such an extent that I am incapable of thinking of anything more intelligent.

MAUD. I wish I could terrify you. Does nothing move you ?

SEBASTIAN (*bowing slightly*). Nothing !

MAUD. A man of marble ! It's quite impossible. Nobody's like that, really.

SEBASTIAN (*politely*). I should say that you had come as near to that perfection as anyone has ever been. You're wonderful !

MAUD. Well, I wish you wouldn't say so.

SEBASTIAN (*taking her hand and kissing it*). So do I, but the words come out before I know it. I'm not really responsible for myself when I'm with you. I lose all control.

MAUD (*snatching her hand away*). Really, Sebastian, anyone hearing you talk would think you were an impotent old man.

SEBASTIAN. So I am.

MAUD. What's inside you? What do you live for? Why are you never bored?

SEBASTIAN. Have you ever noticed what a beautiful hand you have? Women often overlook the one true beauty they possess.

MAUD. That is a proof that it is really theirs. My hand is me.

SEBASTIAN. I wasn't thinking of you. I was thinking of your hand which is very lovely and is not you (*He takes her hand again and inspects it closely and with real passion.*) It is exquisite! (*Returning to his usual manner.*) It is such things that prevent me from ever being bored.

MAUD. I hate that sort of clap-trap. Why do you try to impose on me with it?

SEBASTIAN. You have a wonderful gift for making a man feel a fool even when he is being profoundly sensible.

MAUD. I don't understand what all those words mean. It is impossible to get near you: one is simply met with a cloud of words. You throw them over one like a net, then retire and watch your victim struggling.

SEBASTIAN. While you merely choke him with your beauty and watch his death throes with amusement.

MAUD (*contemptuously*). They never die.

SEBASTIAN. Oh, yes, they do. They look at you and die, or some imaginary phantasy awakes and dies fruitless within them.

MAUD (*fiercely*). And does nothing die in me? Hundreds of creating phantoms haunt me and project themselves as vivid as the shadows at midday, but they all fade away like gibbering ghosts at every man's face. Where is the man who can take them in his arms and give them bodies and show their beauty to the world?

SEBASTIAN. Anyone you choose to pick up.

MAUD. Faugh!

SEBASTIAN. Even I could do it, although you just called me an impotent old man. (*Pause.*) Of course I should have to get drunk first.

MAUD. Yes, that is always it, get drunk and then anything and everything is possible. It doesn't matter how you get drunk, whisky, music, lust, sentiment. But no man who is drunk shall ever have me, and I'll not get drunk for any man.

SEBASTIAN. Then you must resign yourself to a life of virgin maidenhood. I have always thought it was a serious defect in our modern civilization that we have no institution such as the Roman College of Vestal Virgins. The convent is no longer fashionable, and besides religion is only another form of intoxication. What is needed is a new priesthood of Diana in which each virgin vows herself to the utmost imaginative licentiousness with an oath never once to lose her balance

and tumble into the arms of reality, and a preliminary confession that she doesn't believe in Diana in the least.

MAUD. How unattractive it sounds ! Why is it that as soon as an idea is put into words one is disillusioned completely ?

SEBASTIAN. How beautiful is the God Love. At his very name :

There fell a light
Upon the gold tranquility of Time
And on the marble Silence music fell
Like sparkling water. . . .

yet this great God cannot walk without arms and legs, and then he's nothing but a man—or a woman.

MAUD. Why don't you make love to me, Sebastian ?

SEBASTIAN. What, you want me to get drunk too !

MAUD. You admire the beauty of my hand. Doesn't the really exquisite line of my leg intoxicate you ? (*She draws her skirt up beyond her knee.*)

SEBASTIAN (*grimly*). Its beauty preserves me from that madness. . . . (*Lightly.*) Ah, I know if I once let myself become intoxicated you would spurn me with contempt and that would be very unpleasant.

MAUD. It might be very pleasant. Some men adore it.

SEBASTIAN. Oh, I know all about that. I should suffer as exquisitely as anyone. (*His tone changing to one of calm abstraction as he walks across the room.*) But really you don't interest me very deeply. You see I have got over that insatiable craving to beget offspring which afflicts most men of my age and makes you irresistible.

MAUD. You haven't. I feel it in your voice.

SEBASTIAN. Very well, you must be content to feel it there. . . . And now I am going lest you smack my face or do anything to incite me to a violence which is contrary to my whole nature.

MAUD. Sebastian, darling, I love you.

SEBASTIAN (*sternly*). Don't talk such nonsense to me. (*Exit.*)

(*Same Scene. Enter from centre de Bomph.*)

DE BOMPH. How wonderful you look !

MAUD (*disdainfully*). Indeed ! (*She goes to mantelpiece and raising both arms touches her hair lightly and surveys herself critically in the mirror.*) (*De Bomph watches her fascinated. She completely ignores him, and proceeds to powder her nose. When finished she turns round.*) (*Coolly.*) Oh, are you still there ! Oughtn't you to be playing ?

DE BOMPH (*reddening*). Do you want me to play ?

MAUD. I ! I'm perfectly indifferent. I never listen, but didn't Smaragda ask you to play ?

DE BOMPH (*sullenly*). I've played enough.
(*Indicating settee.*) Won't you sit down?

MAUD (*contemptuously*). Whatever for? (*Crossing the room to door R.*)

DE BOMPH. Where are you going?

(*She does not answer, but at the door turns and gives him one brilliant, disdainful, provoking smile and vanishes—De Bomp follows. The room is empty for a few seconds. Presently Meyer, Sebastian and the Prime Minister enter. The Prime Minister is in evening dress wearing the O.M. Meyer carefully closes the folding doors.*)

PRIME MINISTER. My dear Sir Leo, I envy you your wonderful house. You must have plundered the capitals of Europe.

SEBASTIAN. His ancestors did.

PRIME M. Well, we can't all have talented ancestors. None of mine ever showed the slightest sign of intelligence.

MEYER (*courteously*). But they showed great faith in the future.

SEBASTIAN. "Sufficient unto the day was the evil thereof," they must have thought—

PRIME M. Ah, Sebastian, through over-contemplation of the devil they created him, eh? That is the worst of piety! I'm a homeopathist. Minute doses of virtue taken very rarely produce the best results.

SEBASTIAN. But your speeches, Sir ?

PRIME M. Pooh, my speeches are poetry ! In poetry exaggeration is everything. Have these boys inherited their poetic gifts from their father ?

MEYER. Oh, not at all. Lord Simon is a very remarkable man, as you will see, my dear Prime Minister, but he lives entirely in the past and—

SEBASTIAN. —has every appearance of a half-wit.

P. MINISTER. I'm glad to hear it. That's very reassuring. You've got to be of our friend Meyer's race to inherit both brains and money.

SEBASTIAN. Yes, dear St. Vitus is the family sieve, brains slipped through all right, but the money stuck.

P. MINISTER (*laughs*). Ha, ha, well, let's discuss what you want me to do, for I haven't much time. Now I've not the least objection to giving the Poet Laureateship to Sylvester, who as your brother, Sebastian, must be both charming and talented.

MEYER. Wouldn't you like to meet him ? He is here.

P. MINISTER (*with a gesture*). On no account ! If I am to make him Poet Laureate I must not meet him. If questions are asked in the House I must be able to say that the new Poet Laureate is personally unknown to me. Questions always are asked—the world's full of disappointed genius.

MEYER. Sylvester is really very talented and very original.

P. MINISTER. That's just what I'm afraid of. If he were a nonentity there'd be no fuss, but I fear he's too modern, too queer, too highbrow. There'll be a tremendous outcry. Every daily newspaper that's completely forgotten there is such a thing as a Poet Laureate will immediately pour forth columns on the need of having a poet to inspire the nation with its old ideals, to voice its feelings on solemn occasions, to teach men and women how to lead lives of unselfish devotion to their country and their fellow beings—as if they didn't get enough of that sort of thing from me!

SEBASTIAN. At any rate, sir, they won't be able to accuse you of personal interest in the appointment.

P. MINISTER. No, but all the weeklies and the literary papers will be full of allusions to my illiteracy. Mr. Pilbery-Flower will say in "The Situation" (*he mimics Flower*), "No doubt the Prime Minister has taken the advice of experts before making this appointment as we cannot believe that he himself would understand any single line that Mr. Snodgrass has written." How do you think I like reading that sort of thing? (*He continues.*) The "Times" will say, "It was no doubt commendable that the Prime Minister should have resisted the temptation to make a popular appointment and we have reasons to congratulate ourselves that the Laureateship has not been given as a reward for political

services to one of those vulgar versifiers whose poems so resemble the Prime Minister's own familiar form of oratory ; but we have only to become conscious of our profound relief to discover with a shock how low have fallen all expectations of wise leadership from the head of the present Government"—then they'll be off on the Ruhr or Reparations or Housing !

SEBASTIAN (*calmly*). Well, let them, it's only some poor sweated journalist saying what his employer tells him.

P. MINISTER. Don't you believe it ! The sweated journalist of to-day may be the Prime Minister of to-morrow. That sweated journalist is paid to say things his employer can't think of. If they awake an echo in the heart of the nation you're done for !

MEYER. But the nation has so many hearts, she's like a woman.

SEBASTIAN. And her suitors are all deceivers.

P. MINISTER. Well, gentlemen, it's quite obvious there must be a bargain in this matter. You cannot expect me to make a public exhibition of my qualities for nothing.

SEBASTIAN. You are to meet Lady Torrent presently. You know what her social influence is and how antagonistic she has always been to you. I believe you will now find her friendly and—

P. MINISTER. I will do my best to make her so, but that is not enough.

MEYER. But if she brings her millionaire over to you.

P. MINISTER. Ah, but will she? No, I want to meet Lady Torrent with a weapon in my hands.

SEBASTIAN. What weapon?

P. MINISTER. Tell me the name of her millionaire and it's a bargain.

SEBASTIAN. But that would be betraying Lady Torrent's confidence.

P. MINISTER. Not if she's going to impart the information to me. I'll give her every opportunity of telling me first.

SEBASTIAN. I would much rather leave it to her.

P. MINISTER. Look here, Sebastian, like all aristocrats born to do nothing but sponge on the rest of the world you want something for nothing. You are trying to cheat me.

SEBASTIAN (*flushing*). I beg your pardon. Here is the name. (*He writes it on a slip of paper and passes it to the Prime Minister—who takes it without looking at it and puts it in his pocket.*)

P. MINISTER (*genially*). That's right, my boy. Now I'll promise you something—I'll not deprive Lady Torrent of her millionaire or her theatre if I can help it. There are other things she can do for me and I'll now be able to ask her to do them. If she won't do them then she'll lose her theatre;

but don't let that disturb you. It will simply mean that the theatre really meant nothing to her after all.

MEYER. It seems a real enough passion with her.

P. MINISTER. "Seems"! My dear Sir Leo—the world is full of people who *seem* serious until they are asked to pay for their desires. Sacrifice is the test of passion. But nobody ever wants to give up anything. The more useless it is the more they fear other people may find it valuable. Well now. (*Turning to Sebastian.*) We'd better have your father in to see how much we can screw out of him for Sylvester—that's what I've got to do, isn't it? (*Rubbing his hands gleefully.*) The amount of dirty work that gets put on to me in this world is astonishing.

MEYER. I'll go and bring him. (*Exit.*)

P. MINISTER. Extraordinary people these Jews! All the world's shadiest transactions are done in their houses but never by them.

SEBASTIAN (*walking about*). Well, it's his own fault. My father should have treated us decently then we shouldn't have to behave like this.

P. MINISTER. Remember that argument the next time there's a strike. I'm always talking like that to employers, but (*completely changing his expression and speaking with intense malevolence*)—but let me tell you, Sebastian, I don't believe it! It's really war to the knife between everybody—War! WAR!! WAR!!! More prolonged,

more frightful, more subtle, more profound than our deepest imagination ! This world's an appalling battle-field and most of it's inhabitants are already corpses—slain before they were born ! (*He changes his expression to a charming smile and speaks in a soft gentle voice.*) But they still go about eating, sleeping and voting—voting for Medulla or me. Ha ! ha ! (*he laughs loudly*) and (*laughing softly*) the funniest thing of all—killing each other, ha ! ha ! corpses in soldiers' uniform busy blowing each other to pieces with guns ! Isn't it ludicrous (*he laughs, and then stops and looks about him fearfully and whispers*) but isn't it terrifying ? (*He takes Sebastian by the shoulder.*) What does it mean ? (*He stops and puts his hand to his forehead.*) You don't know what it is to govern a country in these times. The strain of the last few weeks has been awful. We are standing on a volcano and (*laughing wildly*) everybody thinks it's extinct, ha ! ha ! I tell you, Sebastian, I'm going back to Downing Street in twenty minutes and I tremble to think of what may be awaiting me. (*Changing his expression to a humorous grin.*) And a more gagger set of ministers than my colleagues could only be found among the followers of Mr. Arthur Medulla.

(*Enter Meyer with Lord Simon Snodgrass.*)

MEYER (*introducing them*). The Prime Minister, Lord Simon Snodgrass !

(*The Prime Minister resumes his mask of cat-like geniality.*)

LORD SIMON (*trembling*). I have never approved of you, sir, let me tell you, never !

P. MINISTER (*genially*). I should never have expected it of you, Lord Simon—I am of mushroom growth—sprung up in a night.

LORD SIMON (*more affably*). But you are a man of action, you get things done. Why have you made my son Poet Laureate ?

P. MINISTER. I've not done so yet, Lord Simon, but it is my intention.

LORD SIMON. I see no reason why he should be Poet Laureate. His verses are unreadable. They have no form and no sense. They bear no resemblance to the great works of the past.

P. MINISTER (*politely*). As I bear no resemblance to the great Statesmen of the past. The world moves on, Lord Simon, and it desires novelty—and there is not enough second-hand furniture to go round.

LORD SIMON (*stuttering*). Second-hand furniture, sir ! What do you mean ?

P. MINISTER. We can't all be genuine antiques ; but Sylvester is something even better ; he's an original genius.

LORD SIMON. And what is an original genius doing in my family, sir. Original genius, let me tell you, is only another name for charlatanry.

P. MINISTER. But charlatanry added to genius is like a nought added to a figure, it multiplies it by ten.

LORD SIMON. I dislike these smart sayings—the world's full of them to-day, full of smart sayings and shoddy performances. I had hoped to see my sons men of taste and solidity, and not fashionable poetasters. Let me tell you, sir, if Sylvester had genius I should be the first to know it. I should feel it in my bones, but—

P. MINISTER (*slightly changing his manner*). Lord Simon, I represent His Majesty's Government. If His Majesty's Government thinks your son the most worthy recipient of the Poet Laureateship there is nothing more to be said. It is not a question for a popular vote. What I have to consider is Sylvester's refusal to accept the Laureateship.

LORD SIMON (*astonished*). What ! Sylvester has refused !

P. MINISTER. He has.

LORD SIMON. And why ?

P. MINISTER. He declines to say, but I think it can only be on the ground that his family has not the means to sustain the dignity of the position.

LORD SIMON (*violently*). My son without the means to maintain the dignity of a tuppenny-hapenny modern Poet Laureateship ! By God, sir, your ignorance is notorious but none the less offensive. Let me tell you, sir, my son has all that a son of mine requires and that is enough for any Poet Laureate, or Prime Minister — and with no need for shady speculations !

SEBASTIAN (*interposing*). Father, the Prime Minister is a guest here like yourself !

P. MINISTER (*coolly and quite unperturbed*). My dear Lord Simon, nobody is more acutely aware of the value of financial independence than myself, but long experience has taught me that those who protest most vehemently of their financial position are generally men of straw—however antique their origin.

LORD SIMON (*exploding*). Men of straw ! Do you think I'm a man of straw, sir ?

P. MINISTER. Lord Simon, I know nothing of you but your name. It is an old one, but not necessarily a good one—on a cheque.

LORD SIMON. Damnation, sir. You insult me ! Do you suggest my name is not good on a cheque !

P. MINISTER (*almost sneering*). Well, sir, do you expect me to give your son the money to accept the Poet Laureateship—

LORD SIMON (*screaming*). No, sir, I don't. And you shall have a cheque for £10,000 to give my son with the Laureateship, and may the devil take you both.

P. MINISTER (*coolly*). Your promise would be quite sufficient, Lord Simon.

LORD SIMON (*furiously*). I'll write you a cheque now, d'you hear, now ! (*To Meyer.*) Give me a pen.

MEYER. There's pen and ink downstairs, if you want them, Lord Simon.

P. MINISTER. I'd much rather you thought it over, Lord Simon. It is a large sum.

LORD SIMON (*trembling with rage*). No, now ! now ! Come at once, sir ! A large sum !! To me, it's nothing ! Nothing !!

MEYER. This way, Lord Simon.

(*Exeunt. Prime Minister winks at Sebastian.*)

P. MINISTER (*following*). My dear Sebastian, he's like wax.

(*Enter Dumbell who opens folding doors, after arranging them he goes out. Enter Lady Torrent and Maud.*)

LADY T. (*hurriedly*). I want you to drive the Prime Minister straight down to Sutton Veney. You'll arrive there in the morning. The car's outside, waiting. I'll tell him you'll drive him to Downing Street and you'll have to do what you can when he finds out you're not taking him there. I've 'phoned Carrington you're coming. And remember you're not to bring me into it. It's to be a prank of your own, for a bet.

MAUD. What a bore ! And I was just beginning to amuse myself with that young man.

LADY T. Well, take him with you if you can rely on him. He might be useful. (*Pause.*) Simpson's a good driver and you'll be out of London in about half an hour, and then you'll be all right. You'll have to try and prevent him noticing the

time. It doesn't take more than ten minutes from here to Downing Street, and he might be able to attract attention if he found out before you got him out of the suburbs.

MAUD. It's all very well, but he may become violent ; he's not a gentleman.

LADY T. My dear, if he becomes violent put your arms round his neck and cling to him.

MAUD (*cynically*). Very pleasant for me !

LADY T. It ought to just suit you. Your young friend will tear you from his arms and sit on his head.

MAUD. Quite an ideal arrangement ! How amusing ! How long am I to keep him ?

LADY T. I'll 'phone you to-morrow. They're with Sebastian and St. Vitus, Dumbell says ; come and I'll introduce you. No, this way.

(*Exeunt R. Enter Smaragda and de Bomph.*)

SMARAGDA. Everybody's downstairs eating. Play something.

DE BOMPH (*restlessly walking up and down and looking at doors*). I'm not in the mood.

SMARAGDA (*sitting down*). It's a terrible strain to have imagination—it can create a multitude of devils to destroy one.

DE BOMPH (*excitedly*). Yes, but they fight each other.

SMARAGDA. And they are not only devils, but spirits—Holy spirits—the angels and demons of ancient religions. Who knows whether they walk the earth as they walk the mind.

DE BOMPH (*turning to her*). You cannot talk to these English, they are dead . . . poof! Shells of snails—escargots! and the snails have been eaten. I read your Milton, do you remember?

Here lands the Fiend, a spot like which perhaps
Astronomer in the Sun's lucent orb
Through his glazed optic tube yet never saw.
The place he found beyond expression bright,
Compared with ought on Earth, metal or stone—
Not all parts like, but all alike informed
With radiant light, as glowing iron will fire.
What wonder then if fields and regions here
Breathe forth elixir pure, and rivers run
Potable gold, when, with one virtuous touch,
The arch-chemic Sun, so far from us remote,
Produces, with terrestrial humour mixed,
Here in the dark so many precious things. . . .

And I asked Sebastian and Sylvester about him but they shrugged their shoulders and said he was boring—boring! Everything is boring. Yes, they are right. They do not live in the world of demons. They are like empty skulls on the battlefield while the air is thick with spirits, fighting. What is my music but their cries of agony as they are torn to pieces and bloodless join together again, legions of them! But Sebastian thinks it is a new and clever noise I make. Pooh! How disgusting! I spit out these imbeciles! (*He spits into the fireplace.*)

SMARAGDA. I am glad you understand Milton.

DE BOMPH. When I read the name Lucifer I tremble. I know Lucifer. He is so calm, so bright with flaxen-silver hair and limbs like shining armour. When he looks over the hills as Day falls, lying like a huge bronze shadow with hilly shoulders and valleys between his limbs and rises with invisible wings into the sky, I ask myself do I see this in my mind, this apparition? What is this outstretched hilly body and this star? What is this land on which I gaze? . . . these phantoms, these spirits . . . you, Smaragda.

SMARAGDA (*dreamily*). I !

DE BOMPH (*moving his hands before his eyes as if feeling for words*). Your face, it is a flower upon a bush, a smile woven upon matter, an angel emerging from stone. It will soon disappear like all the other demons that haunt the universe, but where did it go, will it come again into the world—that mysterious face ! (*Clenching his hands with an intense expression.*) What is it? What are you Smaragda, and what is that other woman? (*Pause.*) She is another demon. But what is the meaning of that smiling mask? It does not smile at me but at a devil in me. They smile at each other as they tear each other to pieces. I am like the sea in which millions of grinning monsters float, or like the air in which they appear and disappear, awake and fade without leaving a ripple anywhere. But if I let that devil take me to her, all the other devils will vanish. There will be peace ! I shall become dead matter again.

I shall have frozen into a shape that does not alter, like the earth's outlines in the minds of dead men. (*Pauses—he walks up and down.*) She has only the one mask, therefore she is a devil, but you and I, Smaragda, have more, and we are not devils. The devils are those with only one mask, but what are we? Why do we come? What are we doing here among these devils in masks? What is this Grand Charade in which the stars and mountains are the faces of the dead? Who is there behind it all? Who is speaking to you, Smaragda, *now*?

SMARAGDA (*softly*). She is very beautiful, more beautiful than I am, but I rejoice in her beauty. I am unattainable, there is no man yet born to be my lover, but she is attainable. Yet she is not for you, only for the devil within you.

DE BOMPH. And he must be fed; but he will grow so big, he will destroy everything.

SMARAGDA (*clearly*). He will destroy nothing. Even as he becomes big he will become thin as a shadow, he will suddenly vanish into air, for he is only an appearance. (*Changing her tone.*) Do you know that I feel we shall all vanish to-night?

DE BOMPH (*stopping still*). What!

SMARAGDA (*rising*). Yes, we shall all vanish to-night! You will not see me again. (*Holding out her hand.*) Goodbye! I don't know to whom it is that I am saying Goodbye, but I feel that it is to myself. Dear, beloved self, farewell—Oh, why am I crying? (*Exit back.*)

(De Bomph turns and stands still, leaning against the mantelpiece with his back to the room. Presently after a few moments of silence, Maud enters.)

MAUD. Mr. De Bomph. I am going to drive the Prime Minister to Downing Street. Would you care to come with me?

DE BOMPH (*turning with a quiet expression*). I have a devil who is entirely at your service, madam—

MAUD. That is not a very polite way of accepting an invitation.

DE BOMPH. It is the devil, not politeness you want.

MAUD (*coldly*). I'll have no devil who isn't polite.

DE BOMPH (*slightly grimly*). He's a very humble devil; he begs on his knees to be allowed to come.

(*Enter Lady Torrent and the Prime Minister.*)

P. MINISTER. Well, now I must be off.

MAUD (*to Prime Minister*). This is Mr. De Bomph, a great friend of Sebastian's who is coming with us.

P. MINISTER (*acknowledging De Bomph with a nod*). What a disappointment. I thought I was to have you all to myself.

MAUD. You'll soon have quite enough of me.

P. MINISTER. That would be impossible I am sure. Don't you agree, Mr. De Bomph?

DE BOMPH. I think of Miss Torrent one would either have too much or too little.

P. MINISTER (*laughs*). Goodbye, Lady Torrent. We meet again soon.

LADY T. (*smiling*). Ah ! Shall we recognise each other ?

P. MINISTER (*genially*). Well, I hope you won't starting cutting me at our second meeting ; you know if you do—(*holds up his finger threateningly*)—Goodbye.

(*Exeunt except Lady Torrent. Presently Sir Leo enters.*)

SIR LEO. Well he's gone and he's got £10,000 out of Lord Simon for Sylvester.

LADY T. Where's Percy and Medulla, I've not seen them for a long time ?

SIR LEO. Percy kept out of the way. The Prime Minister didn't know he was here, but they know he's here at Downing Street. He's expecting to be rung up to go there any moment. They're downstairs playing Bridge with that awful couple you insisted on my asking.

LADY T. They're very influential. He's far more widely read than Pilbery-Flower and she's—

(*Enter Sylvester and Sebastian.*)

SYLVESTER (*gaily*). Well, Old St. Vitus has gone—we've just had an affectionate parting. (*Waving cheque.*) Do you know the Prime Minister rooked him for £10,000. It's more

than we've all had out of him for the last ten years. What an incredible ruffian he must be. He'll get my vote next time. He's the man to diddle Europe.

SEBASTIAN. (*calmly*). But we also happen to be Europeans.

(*A terrific explosion is heard in the far distance. They all stand absolutely still, then after a few moments' dead silence.*)

LADY T. (*paling*). What was that?

(*They look at each other, straining to hear if another follows, but all is quiet.*)

SEBASTIAN (*quietly*). Some gasometer, I should think.

(*Enter Pilbery-Flower.*)

FLOWER. Did you hear that? Something terrible is happening.

(*They stand still. Enter Percy Parson agitated followed by Medulla and Mr. and Mrs. Fortnight-Taylor.*)

PARSONS. They've just rung up from Downing Street. The Prime Minister is wanted at once. I said he'd left, but (*looking around*) he hasn't arrived.

SEBASTIAN. He ought to be there any moment.

PARSONS (*in a strained voice*). It was the Foreign Secretary himself speaking, and when I said I'd

come along immediately he cut me short. "For God's sake stay where you are," he said, and cut off.

(They all stand silent looking at one another. Long pause.)

MR. P. FLOWER. What is that? *(He walks across the room sniffing.)*

(The others watch him fascinated.)

My God! Can't you smell it? It's come at last!

MEDULLA *(in a terrible whisper)*. What do you mean?

MR. P. FLOWER. They're here. Above us in the air—it's dropping down, like a dew . . . *(falling on his knees)* the gentle dew from Heaven, my God!

MEYER *(screaming)*. Open those doors! *(He rushes to the folding doors and flings them aside.)* Air! Air!

SEBASTIAN *(rushing after him)*. What are you doing? Are you mad?

MR. P. FLOWER. There's no escape, none. It'll penetrate everywhere and it's almost invisible! This is the end. Babylon, Egypt, Rome, and now the British Empire!

MEYER *(screaming)*. Let me get out, you devil! Dumbell! Dumbell!

MR. F. TAYLOR. Down into the cellars. It's our only hope! Down! down! *(He rushes to the door, then all follow.)*

LADY T. (*wringing her hands*). Maud, Maud darling !

SEBASTIAN (*gently*). Come along. There's just a chance she's got beyond the radius and escaped.

MR. P. FLOWER. Yes, but what to ?

(*Exeunt.*)

The stage is completely empty. A faint vapour may be seen ascending, but it clears. The curtains are then to be seen open and the evening star is seen shining through the window as at the beginning of the play. Then a voice Speaks :

THE VOICE.

I am Smaragda's lover. I am He
Who dwells behind all masks. Now they have
vanished

These players of my dreaming. A world has faded
Of moving forms that had enchanted voices
And like the bells in towers of vanished cities
That print romance upon the ruined landscape
Their chimes ring on within the fleshly memory.
Slowly the landscape changes, so change bodies
Which are the landscape of the Spirit, singing
As the bells sing on hill and plain and valley.
This country of imagination vanished
Look and behold my countenance among you !

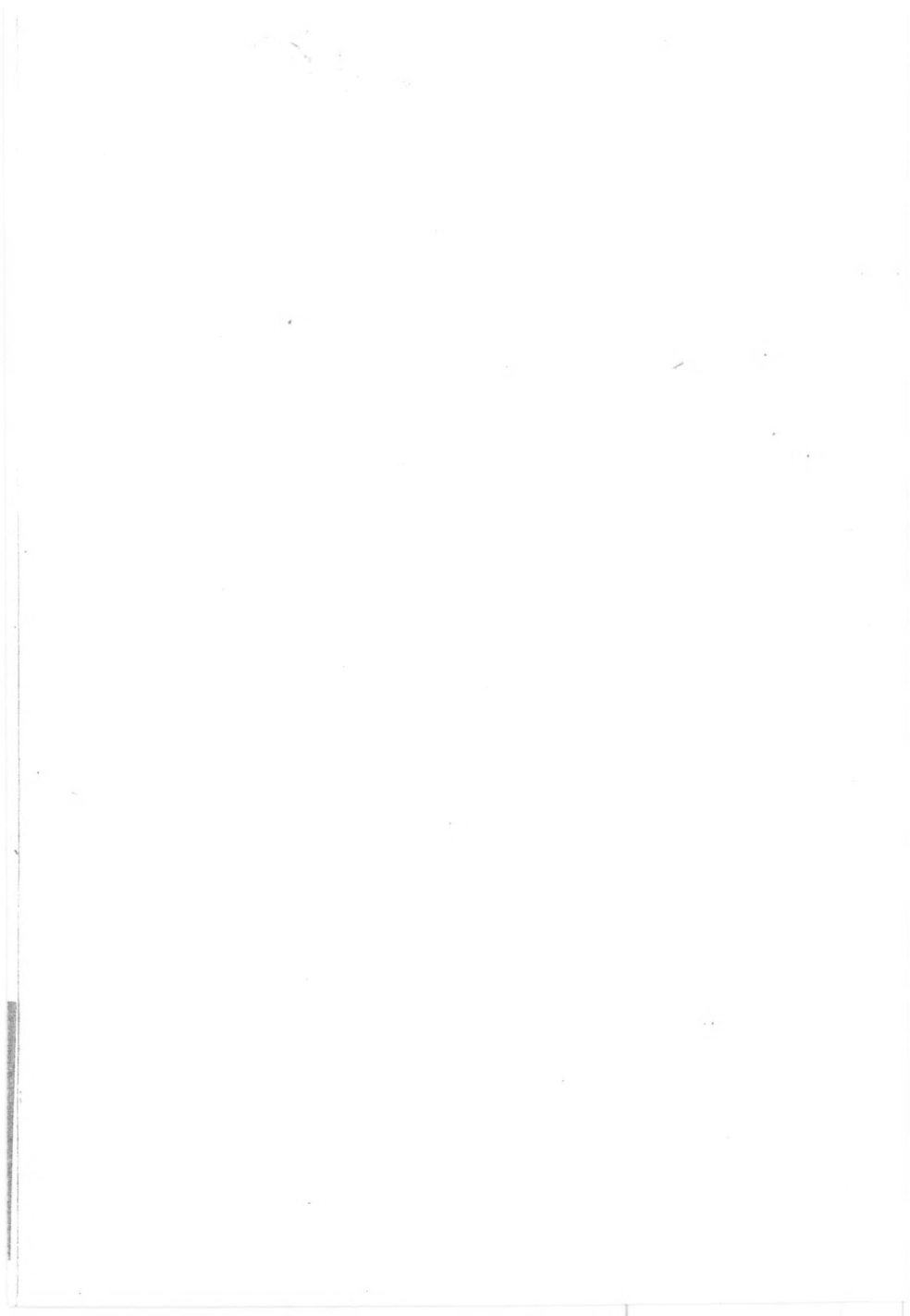
CURTAIN

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